Tails from the Coasts

Nature Stories of Singapore

10 May - 7 September 2025

Australian Museum

Gallery Guide

Tails from the Coasts: Nature Stories of Singapore

Singapore has been known over the years as the Lion City, the Garden City, and now, a City in Nature. From the founding myth of prince Sang Nila Utama sighting a lion on arrival and giving the island its name, to the contemporary vision of a thriving City in Nature by 2030, nature has been at the heart of narratives surrounding Singapore.

This exhibition explores the enduring connections between the human and animal inhabitants of Singapore through selected drawings from the National Museum of Singapore's (NMS) treasured William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings. The 477 watercolour drawings were commissioned and collected more than 200 years ago by William Farquhar, the first Resident and Commandant of Singapore, and document the rich biodiversity of Singapore and the Malay Peninsula (referred to as Singapore-Malaya in this exhibition).

They were donated to the Royal Asiatic Society in 1827, and eventually purchased by Mr. G. K. Goh, who donated the collection to NMS in 1995. The original drawings are on display in Australia for the first time.

Beyond the shores of Singapore, the exhibition commemorates the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Singapore and Australia in 2025 from the fresh angle of natural history and biodiversity, highlighting the animals and geographies that connect us.

Blue-winged pitta / Burung pacat

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore

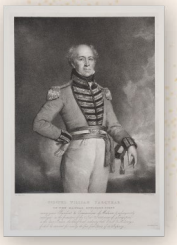
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh

1995-02934

Exhibition Sections

Section 1
It Begins with a Tail

The exhibition first introduces the collection of natural history drawings and William Farquhar, who commissioned them during his term as Resident and Commandant of Melaka (1803–1818), before his appointment in Singapore from 1819 to 1823. The drawings not only depict the animals, but hint at encounters between Farquhar, his network of collaborators, and the fauna during the production of the drawings.



Portrait of William Farquhar
1830

Lithograph by M. Gauci based on a painting by John Graham-Gilbert

Collection of the
National Museum of Singapore

2018-00495

Section 2
Land Tails

This section and the two that follow explore human-animal encounters in Singapore from the perspectives of land, air and water respectively.

Singapore is rich in biodiversity despite its small size of about 740 square kilometres, and home to more than 60 species of mammals and over 160 species of reptiles. This section features land animals, many of which are unique to Singapore-Malaya.

Red giant flying squirrel /
Tupai terbang merah

Collection of the
National Museum of Singapore

Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh

1995-02894

Section 3
Tailing the Winds

Singapore is a haven for birds, with native bird species that number over 300, as well as numerous migratory birds that stop over on their East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF) route. This section introduces migratory birds in Singapore-Malaya that use the EAAF, followed by a selection of resident species.

Spot-billed pelican /
Burung undan paruh titik

Collection of the
National Museum of Singapore

Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh

1995-02962

Malayan water monitor /
Biawak air

Collection of the
National Museum of Singapore

Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh

1995-02916

Section 4
Tailing the Waters

As an island, water is a key feature of Singapore's natural environment, ranging from freshwater bodies to marine ecosystems such as mangroves, coral reefs, and intertidal zones. Hundreds of species live in these waters. Moreover, both Singapore and Australia are situated in the Indo-Pacific waters and share much of their marine life. This section features animals found in the waters within and surrounding Singapore-Malaya.

Section 5
Tail End

This section highlights endangered animals from the land, air and waters, and efforts to conserve them. Even as the exhibition has explored the enduring connections between the human and animal inhabitants of Singapore, current conservation efforts are key to safeguarding these connections for years to come.

Winghead shark / Ikan yu tanduk

Collection of the
National Museum of Singapore

Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh

1995-03154

Exhibition Highlights

Can you spot the fascinating connections between some of the animals featured in this exhibition?

Here are a few to get you started!

Farquhar and His Animals

Binturong / Binturung

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-02888

Section 1: It Begins with a Tail

Estuarine crocodile / Buaya

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-02914

Section 2: Land Tails

Farquhar was known for keeping a menagerie of animals. This included a binturong, which he kept in his Melaka and Singapore homes, feeding it vegetables, plantains, eggs and fowls' heads. He also had a dog which was unfortunately eaten by a crocodile while he was walking it along Rochor River in Singapore.

Songs and Sounds

Dark-handed gibbon / Ungka tangan hitam

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-02890

Section 2: Land Tails

Great argus / Burung kuang

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-03220

Section 3: Tailing the Winds

The distinctive calls of the dark-handed gibbon and great argus can be heard from kilometres away. The dark-handed gibbon sings to defend its territory, with high-pitched calls reaching up to a hundred decibels, while the great argus male calls to attract a female audience for its elaborate courtship dance.

Venomous Creatures

Lionfish / Ikan singa

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-03158

Section 4: Tailing the Waters

Slow loris / Kongkang

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-02899

Section 5: Tail End

The lionfish has distinctive spines that deliver venomous stings, whereas the slow loris has a venomous bite, a mix of saliva and secretions from an elbow gland. While these venomous creatures are potentially harmful to humans, human activity poses a grave threat to the slow loris, which is endangered due to habitat loss and illegal poaching.

Parrots of Sea and Sky

Blue-rumped parrot / Bayan tanau

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-02976

Section 3: Tailing the Winds

Green wrasse / Blackspot tuskfish /
Ikan kakak tua

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-03150

Section 4: Tailing the Waters

The Malay name for the green wrasse is *ikan kakak tua*, where "kakak" means "older sister" and "tua" means "old". *Kakak tua* is the basis of the scientific genus name *Cacatua*, first used in the 1700s but formally applied in 1817. It has been adopted into the English language as "cockatoo", referring to a type of parrot, of which 14 species are found in Australia. Other parrots are also found in Asia, such as the blue-rumped parrot that this drawing was likely based on.

Homecoming

Sambar deer / Rusa

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-02883

Section 2: Land Tails

Oriental pied hornbill /
Burung enggang kelingking

Collection of the National Museum of Singapore
Gift of Mr. G. K. Goh
1995-03207

Section 5: Tail End

The sambar deer and oriental pied hornbill almost vanished from Singapore due to hunting and deforestation. The sambar deer was thought to be extinct in 1950, but has since reappeared, likely as a result of escaped zoo animals. The oriental pied hornbill was last sighted in Singapore in the 19th century, but later reappeared in 1994 and has since made a successful comeback alongside conservation and research efforts such as the Singapore Hornbill Project.

About the National Museum of Singapore

With a history dating back to 1887, the National Museum of Singapore (NMS) is the nation's oldest museum with a progressive mind. It was opened on 12 October 1887 by Sir Frederick Weld, Governor of the Straits Settlements, and previously Governor of Western Australia and Tasmania.

Today, NMS is a social history museum that adopts multi-perspective ways of presenting history and culture, featuring important artefacts that tell the stories of Singapore and the world to redefine the conventional museum experience. The museum is home to thought-provoking exhibitions and hosts exciting events all year round including the Singapore Night Festival.

For more information, please visit **www.nhb.gov.sg/nationalmuseum/**.

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